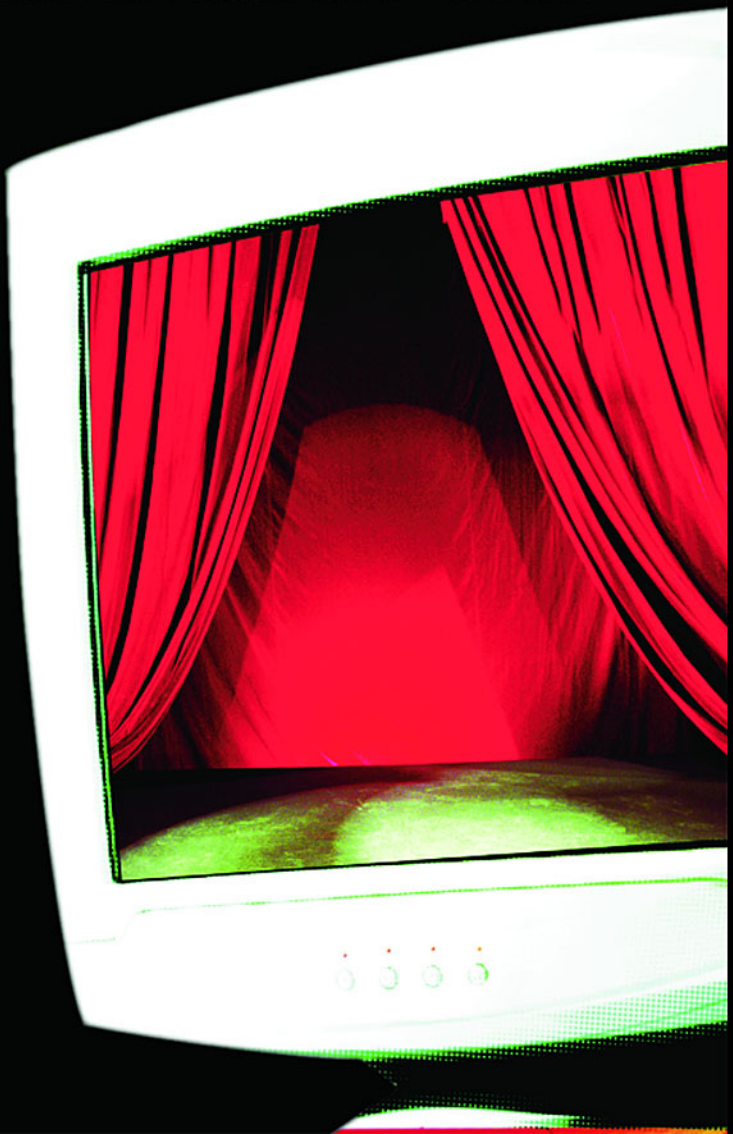
PHILIP AUSLANDER

LIVENESS

PERFORMANCE IN A MEDIATIZED CULTURE

SECOND EDITION



LIVENESS

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Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture addresses what may be the single most important question facing all kinds of performance today. What is the status of live performance in a culture dominated by mass media?

Since its first appearance, Philip Auslander's ground-breaking book has helped to reconfigure a new area of study. Looking at specific instances of live performance such as theatre, rock music, sport, and courtroom testimony, *Liveness* offers penetrating insights into media culture, suggesting that media technology has encroached on live events to the point where many are hardly live at all. In this new edition, the author thoroughly updates his provocative argument to take into account new digital and media technologies, and cultural, social, and legal developments.

In tackling some of the last great shibboleths surrounding the high cultural status of the live event, this book will continue to shape opinion and to provoke lively debate on a crucial artistic dilemma: what is live performance and what can it mean to us now?

Philip Auslander teaches Performance Studies at the Georgia Institute of Technology, USA. He is author of *From Acting to Performance* (1997) and *Theory for Performance Studies* (2007) and edited *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2003).

LIVENESS

Performance in a mediatized culture

Second Edition

Philip Auslander

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THIS IS DEDICATED TO THE ONE I LOVE
FOR DEANNA SIRLIN

> Why would you make live work in an age of mass communications? Why work in more or less the only field which still insists on presence? For artists interested in "the contemporary" this area of live performance seems like a bit of a backwater. Do you have something against mass-reproduction? Do you work from some quaint notion about immediacy and real presence?
>
> I don't know.
>
> Answer the question.
>
> (Forced Entertainment 1996:87)

> Like most art critics, I get my best ideas from television.
>
> (Dave Hickey 1996:43)

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I would like to thank Talia Rodgers for her enthusiasm and unflagging support of this project from the moment I first told her about it over a modest dinner in Philadelphia in 1993 to my suggestion in 2006 that it might be time for a second edition. I would also like to thank Minh Ha Duong for shepherding the second edition and Maria Carter, my research and editorial assistant.

The material of this book has been the basis for numerous papers and presentations over a period that has now lasted for a decade and a half. I want to thank all the organizers of all the conferences, panels, and public lectures who provided me with platforms. The responses I got on all occasions were stimulating and instructive; the influence of those occasions and audiences is reflected here.

Many colleagues, both inside and outside the academy, made significant contributions to the ideas expressed here and I thank them all. I also wish to thank my students at both the Georgia Institute of Technology and the University of Georgia for participating in courses whose materials derived in whole or part from my continuing obsession with liveness. Your presence is reflected here more than you know.

And thanks to Evie Sirlin, Laci Reed-Sirlin, and Bowie Auslander and Nico Sirlin, whose live and lively presences made the work on this book from its inception to the present so much more pleasant.

Parts of Chapters 2 and 3 appeared in "Liveness: performance and the anxiety of simulation," in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, edited by Elin Diamond (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). Other parts of Chapter 2 were published in "Against ontology: making distinctions between the live and the mediatized," *Performance Research*, 2, 3 (1997); "Live from cyberspace, or, I was sitting at my computer this guy appeared he thought I was a bot," *Performing Arts Journal*, 24, 1 (2002); "No-shows: the headcount from the NEA," *TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies*, 49 (2005); and "The performativity of performance art documentation,"

Performing Arts Journal, 28, 3 (2006). Part of Chapter 3 appeared as "Seeing is believing: live performance and the discourse of authenticity in rock culture," *Literature and Psychology: a journal of psychoanalytic and cultural criticism*, 44, 4 (1998). And part of Chapter 4 was published as "Legally live: performance in/of the law," *TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies*, 49, 2 (1997). I would like to thank the editors and publishers of these journals for permission to use these materials here.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In the early spring of 2001, two years after the initial publication of this book, I found myself in a Gothic refectory at the University of Mainz in Germany. I was there for a conference organized by Performance Studies International and this was the event's climactic banquet. Because the room was exceedingly loud, it was very difficult to converse. Upon hearing my name, the man sharing a wooden bench with me, another American to whom I had not been introduced, shouted, "You're Phil Auslander? Aren't you the guy who hates live performance?"

I set out in the original edition of this book to raise what I hoped were trenchant questions about liveness—a concept that while absolutely central to the project of theatre and performance studies had somehow escaped direct examination in those fields—the values we attribute to it, and the position of live performance in a culture ever more dominated by mass media. I admit to having been motivated by a profound dissatisfaction with the state of the theoretical discourse (or lack of discourse) around these questions. That dissatisfaction has apparently been mistaken quite regularly for hostility toward the idea of live performance itself.

This was never the point, of course. As I tried to make clear in the original introduction, the cultural analysis in which I engage here was, and still is, motivated by "my sense of living in a culture in which something I continue to value seems to have less and less presence and importance." Picking up on this dimension of the work, Martin Barker (2003:36–7) accused me fairly of "cultural pessimism." While I am sure that this second edition largely retains that tone, it may be a bit less pronounced this time around. The best description of my present attitude toward the vagaries of live performance's negotiations with an ever more intensely mediatized world is pleasant bemusement. What, for example, is one to make of the Nashville Opera's providing a commentary track similar to the ones on DVD editions of movies to be listened

to on an iPod as one watched its 2006 production of Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*? Partisans of traditional live performance (or of opera, for that matter) have good reason to be scandalized. I am neither scandalized nor surprised: this kind of development simply seems inevitable, given the current cultural standing of live performance and the continued domination of mediatized forms. Is that pessimistic? I am also entertained at the prospect and open to the possibility that it might make for an interesting experience.

One of the central goals of preparing a second edition was to make the book more responsive to a highly volatile cultural scene. *Liveness* is a book about performance but it is also about media, and media do not stand still. I started the work that led to *Liveness* in the early 1990s; at that time, it seemed plausible to insist that television was the dominant medium. By now, there is a strong case to be made that the honor belongs to the computer, though it seems more accurate to say that there is an ongoing, unresolved struggle for dominance among television, telecommunications, and the Internet. The principal players behind each of these would like nothing better than for it to be your primary source of news, entertainment, art, conversation, and other forms of engagement with the world. It remains to be seen how this struggle will play out.

In any case, although I wanted the second edition of *Liveness* to reflect a much greater cognizance of the centrality of digital media than the first had, I realized early on that I could not replace the central paradigm of the televisual with the digital. That would have resulted in a different book rather than a new edition of an existing one; a book worth writing, perhaps, but as a separate venture. Therefore, I have retained the idea that the televisual is the cultural dominant, while also discussing some of the ways in which digital media raise new issues for the concept of liveness.

One such example, drawn from work I have done since the initial publication of *Liveness*, now ends Chapter 2, following a revised discussion of the distinctive characteristics often attributed to live performance. The other changes I have made to this chapter include providing more up-to-date examples from a broader range of cultural realms, developing further my concept of cultural economy, and stressing that the idea of liveness is a moving target, a historically contingent concept whose meaning changes over time and is keyed to technological development. Although the portions of this chapter that question conventional formulations of how live performance differs from mediatized performance have excited the most response, the idea that the concept of liveness describes a historical, rather than ontological, condition has

increasingly come to seem to me to be the central point and I have tried to emphasize it accordingly.

I revised the next chapter, which focuses on the specific significance of liveness in rock music (a cultural form built around recordings), in response to changing circumstances. Assuming that younger audiences had grown indifferent to the ideology of authenticity in rock, I had been so bold as to predict the demise of that ideology. In fact, that ideology seems to be more powerful than ever. To account for that development, I chose to bookend the chapter with the Milli Vanilli lip-synching scandal of 1990 (which had always been my starting point) and the similar Ashlee Simpson scandal of 2004. The contrast between the two episodes provides a means of demonstrating how the ideology of authenticity emerged with renewed strength from the buffeting it took beginning in the mid-1980s with the advent of MTV, digital sampling, and other simulationist phenomena.

Reviewing Chapter 4, which looks at the status of live performance in the legal context, I concluded that a central argument was not articulated clearly enough because I had placed too much emphasis on the fact that live performance cannot be copyrighted. The more important point is that there has been a trend toward interpreting other existing legal theories (such as trademark) or creating new ones (such as right of publicity) to make ever more aspects of performance legally "ownable." In addition to bringing some of the matters I discuss in this chapter more up to date, I strove to make the narrative of performance's becoming progressively more subject to legal definition clearer and more central. I also added a new section on the intellectual property issues raised by digital performers.

I always meant *Liveness* to be a contentious book, a conversation-starter, and the responses to it over the years have shown that I succeeded in that endeavor. It is my hope that this new edition can both sustain the ongoing discussions of performance in a mediatized culture and start some new ones.

Philip Auslander
Atlanta, March 2007

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INTRODUCTION

"An orchid in the land of technology"[1]

The prospectus for a conference entitled "Why Theatre: Choices for the New Century"[2] posed a question that goes straight to the heart of the matter that concerns me here: "Theatre and the media: rivals or partners?" My answer to this question is unequivocal: at the level of cultural economy,[3] theatre (and live performance generally) and the mass media are rivals, not partners. Neither are they equal rivals: it is absolutely clear that our current cultural formation is saturated with, and dominated by, mass media representations in general, and television in particular (though television is admittedly locked in combat for cultural and economic dominance with the Internet and telecommunications).

In an essay on theatre and cinema, Herbert Blau (1982:121) quotes Marx's *Grundrisse*:

> In all forms of society, there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it.

Although Marx is describing industrial production under bourgeois capitalism, for Blau, "he might as well be describing the cinema." I would

1 The title of this chapter is taken from Walter Benjamin's celebrated essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" (1986 [1936]:40).

2 The conference, which took place in the fall of 1995 in Toronto, was sponsored by the University of Toronto and Humboldt University in Berlin.

3 I use the phrase "cultural economy" to describe a realm of inquiry that includes both the real economic relations among cultural forms, and the relative degrees of cultural prestige and power enjoyed by different forms.

argue, *pace* Marx and Blau, that Marx might as well be describing the television (or computer) screen: Marx's allusions to a general illumination and an ether (a word frequently used in early discussions of broadcasting to describe the medium through which electronic waves pass) are even more appropriate to that medium than to the cinema.

As for the cultural dominance of television and its productions, Cecilia Tichi (1991:3–8) has suggested that television can no longer be seen just as an element in our cultural environment, one discourse among many, but must be seen as an environment in itself. Television has transcended its identity as a particular medium and is suffused through the culture as "the televisual."

> What the televisual names . . . is the end of the medium, in a context, and the arrival of television as the context. What is clear is that television has to be recognised as an organic part of the social fabric; which means that its transmissions are no longer managed by the flick of a switch.
>
> (Fry 1993:13)

In other words, if television once could be seen as ranking among a number of vehicles for conveying expression or information from which we could choose, we no longer have that choice: the televisual has become an intrinsic and determining element of our cultural formation. As Tony Fry indicates, it is indeed no longer a question of thinking about television in various cultural contexts but of seeing it as *the* cultural context. Clearly, this issue and the related question of the nature of television culture could be (and have been) the subjects of books in themselves. The project of describing the position of other cultural discourses within our mediatized environment is as pressing as the project of describing that environment itself. Because live performance is the category of cultural production most directly affected by the dominance of media, it is particularly urgent to address the situation of live performance in our mediatized culture.

Investigating live performance's cultural valence for the present volume, I quickly became impatient with what I consider to be traditional, unreflective assumptions that fail to get much further in their attempts to explicate the value of "liveness" than invoking clichés and mystifications like "the magic of live theatre," the "energy" that supposedly exists between performers and spectators in a live event, and the "community" that live performance is often said to create among performers and spectators. In time, I came to see that concepts such as these do have value for performers and partisans of live performance.

Indeed, it may even be necessary for performers, especially, to believe in them. But where these concepts are used to describe the relationship between live performance and its present mediatized environment, they yield a reductive binary opposition of the live and the mediatized. Steve Wurtzler (1992:89)[4] summarizes this traditional view well:

> As socially and historically produced, the categories of the live and the recorded are defined in a mutually exclusive relationship, in that the notion of the live is premised on the absence of recording and the defining fact of the recorded is the absence of the live.

In this tradition, "the live comes to stand for a category completely outside representation" (*ibid.*:88). In other words, the common assumption is that the live event is "real" and that mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real. In Chapter 2, I will argue that this kind of thinking persists not only in the culture at large but even in contemporary performance studies.[5] The arguments of this chapter are intended both to exploit and to challenge the traditional way of thinking about liveness and its cultural position by employing its terms (that is, taking the binary opposition for granted), then opening those terms themselves to critique. Chapters 3 and 4 depart from a different premise—that liveness must be examined not as a global, undifferentiated phenomenon but within specific cultural and social contexts.

Perhaps because of my impatience with the conventional wisdom, I have sometimes been mistaken for someone who does not value—who is even antagonistic toward—live performance. This is very far from being the case: my interest in the cultural status of live performance derives directly from my sense of living in a culture in which something

4 Wurtzler (1992:89–90) challenges this binary opposition by asserting that "the socially constructed categories live and recorded cannot account for all representational practices." He offers a chart in which various kinds of events are positioned according to spatial and temporal vectors. Two categories of representations that are neither purely live nor purely recorded emerge: those in which performance and audience are spatially separate but temporally co-present (e.g., live television or radio) and those in which performance and audience are spatially co-present but elements of the performance are pre-recorded (e.g., lip-synched concerts, instant replays on stadium video displays). See also Table 1.1, p. 61 below.

5 I have found that scholars working in mass media studies, particularly those interested in television or popular music, have dealt more directly and fruitfully with the question of liveness than most scholars in theatre or performance studies.

I continue to value seems to have less and less presence and importance. Despite my own commitment to the theatre and other forms of live performance, I have tried here to take a fairly hard-headed, unsentimental approach. The resulting assessment of the situation of live performance in a culture dominated by mass media has not made me optimistic about its current and future cultural prestige, as understood in traditional terms. It has also enabled me to see, however, that those terms may no longer be the most useful ones.

Performance artist and actor Eric Bogosian, for example, describes live theatre as:

> medicine for a toxic environment of electronic media mind-pollution . . . Theater clears my head because it takes the subtextual brainwashing of the media madness and SHOUTS that subtext out loud . . . Theater is ritual. It is something we make together every time it happens. Theater is holy. Instead of being bombarded by a cathode ray tube we are speaking to ourselves. Human language, not electronic noise.
>
> (Bogosian 1994:xii)

Bogosian's perception of the value of live performance clearly derives from its existence only in the moment ("every time it happens"), and its putative ability to create community (if not communion) among its participants, including performers and spectators. These are both issues I address in the chapters to follow. Most important for the present discussion, he sets live performance in a relationship of antagonistic opposition to mediatization and imputes to live performance the social, perhaps even political, function of opposing the oppressive regime of "electronic noise" imposed upon us by the mass media. This opposition, and live performance's ostensible curative powers, presumably derive from significant ontological distinctions between live and mediatized cultural forms. This perception of an oppositional relationship between the live and the mediatized animates my own discussion, for I wish both to exploit and to deconstruct that opposition in my discussion of the ontology of live performance in Chapter 2.

Several important premises are implied by my use of the word "mediatized," which I have borrowed from Jean Baudrillard. I often employ this word, admittedly somewhat loosely, to indicate that a particular cultural object is a product of the mass media or of media technology. "Mediatized performance" is performance that is circulated on television, as audio or video recordings, and in other forms based in technologies of reproduction. Baudrillard's own definition is more

expansive: "What is mediatized is not what comes off the daily press, out of the tube, or on the radio: it is what is reinterpreted by the sign form, articulated into models, and administered by the code" (Baudrillard 1981:175–6). For Baudrillard, mediatization is not simply a neutral term describing products of the media. Rather, he sees the media as instrumental in a larger, socio-political process of bringing all discourses under the dominance of a single code. Although I ignore Baudrillard's admonishment that the word "mediatized" does not define modes of cultural production, I hope I have retained in my use of the term Baudrillard's characterization of the mass media as the cultural dominant of contemporary, western(ized) societies. (I believe my description here can be generalized to this extent, though my focus is admittedly on the United States.) I intend to describe both live performance's cultural-economic competition with other forms and the position of live performance in a culture for which mediatization is a vehicle of the general code in a way that live performance is not (or is no longer). Although this book is not generally in service to Baudrillardian politics, I do follow his line in my discussion of rock music in Chapter 3, both to extend his analysis into that cultural realm and to critique that analysis.

In the sense that I am treating live and mediatized performance as parallel forms that participate in the same cultural economy, my usage of "mediatization" follows Fredric Jameson's definition of the term as: "the process whereby the traditional fine arts . . . come to consciousness of themselves as various media within a mediatic system" (Jameson 1991:162). Susan Sontag (1966:25), in her essay on theatre and film, contrasts the two forms by saying that: "theatre is never a 'medium'" in the sense that "one can make a movie 'of' a play but not a play 'of' a movie." Part of my argument in Chapter 2 is intended to prove Sontag wrong: there have long been plays "of" movies and television programs, and live performance can even function as a kind of mass medium. Whereas the traditional view represented by Sontag's comment sees theatre and the live performance arts generally as belonging to a cultural system separate from that of the mass media, live forms have become mediatized in Jameson's sense: they have been forced by economic reality to acknowledge their status as media within a mediatic system that includes the mass media and information technologies. Implicitly acknowledging this situation, a number of theatres have displayed signs similar to the banner that flew outside the Alliance Theater in Atlanta declaring that its offerings are "Not Available on Video," demonstrating that the only way of imputing specificity to the experience of live performance in the current cultural climate is by reference to the dominant experience of mediatization.

There is no question that live performance and mediatized forms compete for audiences in the cultural marketplace, and that mediatized forms have gained the advantage in that competition. Broadway producer Margo Lion's observation about the position of theatre within this competitive cultural economy can be applied to live performance generally: "we have realized that we are all competing for the same entertainment dollars in a climate where theater isn't always first on the list" (quoted in Rick Lyman, "On stage and off," *New York Times*, December 19, 1997:B2). Blau (1992:76) elaborates:

> [The theatre's] status has been continually threatened by what Adorno named the culture industry and . . . the escalating dominance of the media. "Do you go to the theater often?"
>
> That many have never gone, and that those who have, even in countries with established theater traditions, are going elsewhere or, with cable and VCRs, staying home, is also a theatrical fact, a datum of practice.

As Blau recognizes, theatre and other forms of live performance compete directly with mediatized forms that are much more advantageously positioned in the marketplace. By calling the pressure of live performance's competition with the mediatized "a datum of practice" he suggests that performance practice inevitably reflects this pressure in the material conditions under which performance takes place, in the composition of the audience and the formation of its expectations, and in the forms and contents of performance itself.

An important consequence of thinking about live and mediatized performance as belonging to the same mediatic system is the inscription of live performance within the historical logic of media identified by Marshall McLuhan (1964:158): "A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them." Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (1996:339) have refined this analysis with their concept of "remediation"—"the representation of one medium in another." According to their analysis, "new technologies of representation proceed by reforming or remediating earlier ones" (*ibid.*:352).[6] My discussion in Chapter 2 of the relationship between theatre and early

6 Noël Carroll (1998:187–8) also discusses this process, with specific reference to the ways in which some popular art forms were incorporated into art forms based in technologies of mass reproduction.

television and the consequent displacement of live performance by television is an attempt to describe how this historical logic plays out in that instance. To put it bluntly, the general response of live performance to the oppression and economic superiority of mediatized forms has been to become as much like them as possible. From ball games that incorporate instant-replay screens, to rock concerts that recreate the images of music videos, to live stage versions of television shows and movies, to dance and performance art's incorporation of video, evidence of the incursion of mediatization into the live event is available across the entire spectrum of performance genres.

This situation has created an understandable anxiety for those who value live performance, and this anxiety may be at the root of their need to say that live performance has a worth that both transcends and resists market value. In this view, the value of live performance resides in its very resistance to the market and the media, the dominant culture they represent, and the regime of cultural production that supports them. This is the position Peggy Phelan (1993b) has elucidated in her influential *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. For many reasons (which will be elaborated in the following chapters), I find this view untenable. The progressive diminution of previous distinctions between the live and the mediatized, in which live events are becoming ever more like mediatized ones, raises for me the question of whether there really are clear-cut ontological distinctions between live forms and mediatized ones. Although my initial arguments may seem to rest on the assumption that there are, ultimately I find that not to be the case. If live performance cannot be shown to be economically independent of, immune from contamination by, and ontologically different from mediatized forms, in what sense can liveness function as a site of cultural and ideological resistance, as Bogosian, Phelan, and others claim?

Chapter 2 presents an overview of these issues and a general consideration of the status of live performance in a culture dominated by mass media. I begin with a discussion of the relationship between theatre and early television in the United States to show that television originally modeled itself on the live form. This historical narrative serves as an allegory for the general cultural tendency of mediatized forms to displace and replace live ones. I next examine the more recent phenomenon of live events modeling themselves on mediatized representations, in a reversal of the previous historical pattern. I then turn to the way in which the issue of live performance is treated in contemporary performance theory and challenge its grounding of the distinction between the live and the mediatized in ostensible ontological differences between live and mediatized forms. Against that formulation, I argue

that the relationship between live and mediatized forms and the meaning of liveness be understood as historical and contingent rather than determined by immutable differences. To conclude the chapter, I examine several of the conventional explanations for why people value live performance and offer a suggestion of how liveness is being redefined for the digital age.

Chapter 3 offers a case study of the meaning of liveness within one particular cultural formation—that surrounding rock music. Because rock exists primarily as recorded music and only secondarily as live performance (see Gracyk 1996), this cultural context is a particularly interesting one in which to examine the functions and values attributed to live performance. My task, then, is to offer an explanation of what functions live performance once served within rock culture, and to show how those functions changed following the expanded mediatization of rock represented by music video. Considering these issues leads me to discuss some of rock's institutional discourses, especially that of the Grammy awards, and the crisis precipitated by the Milli Vanilli scandal. The chapter concludes with a Baudrillardian analysis of Milli Vanilli in the context of the technological and legal changes affecting the music industry in the 1980s.

Chapter 4 resumes the critique of liveness as a site of cultural and ideological resistance begun in Chapter 2, this time by way of a discussion of the status of live performance in two fields of American jurisprudence. I begin with an examination of the effort in the early 1970s to instate prerecorded videotape trials and discuss the failure of that effort in terms of the law's preference for live courtroom proceedings, a preference that is deeply rooted in constitutional and procedural issues. My purpose there is to show that the legal arena has proved more resistant to the incursion of mediatization than the other cultural sites examined here. I then turn to copyright law. I discuss copyright in Chapter 2 in the context of the music industry; in Chapter 4, it is pivotal to a discussion of the legal status of live performance. While it is true that live performance cannot be copyrighted, other legal theories have been brought to bear to make performance "ownable" nevertheless. Whereas an influential strain of performance theory suggests that live performance's disappearance and persistence only in spectatorial memory make it a site of resistance to the authority of law, I argue that those very same qualities make performance available and useful to the law as both a policed site and a mechanism of regulation. Live performance and its putative ontology of disappearance (which I challenge on other grounds in Chapter 2) are in fact central to the theory and practice of American law. Indeed, the legal arena may be one